

Discerning Patterns of Peaceful Co-Existence in Hir Varis Shah

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The present paper is an attempt to trace instances wherein boundaries of religion and languages are blurred in the *Qissa Hir Varis Shah* (hereafter *Hir Varis*). In the multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual landscape of South Asia, Sufism has played an important role in fostering peaceful co-existence between religious communities. Practicing the Sufi ideals of Varis Shah (as portrayed in *Hir Varis*) can be instrumental in managing conflict and ushering in peace in South Asia. History has proved that partition along religious lines, has failed to produce stability and to deliver security and coherence in the subcontinent. *Hir Varis* holds out the possibility of coexistence and mutual peace in South Asia as it is written in a language which is spoken in both East and West Punjab. It is unlike religious texts which have been written in distant time, oftentimes in a language difficult to understand. The language used by Varis Shah employs both Muslim and Hindu ideational constructs while narrating his story, thereby endearing the story to all. The popularity of Hir suggests that the people of Punjab resisted the domination of the elite languages of Persian or Sanskrit. By opposing the hegemonic influence of the language of power, the Hir affirms that languages are socially constructed and negotiated. Varis Shah has the same position in Punjabi that Shakespeare holds in English, Saadi in Persian, Kalidas in Sanskrit & Ghalib in Urdu.

Introduction

In the current global scenario, where formal religions are viewed with suspicion due to their real or perceived propensity to divide, rather than unite, popular devotional and mystical traditions such as Sufism and Bhakti assume an ever-increasing importance. For long, UNESCO has been mulling over the idea of deploying Sufi ways to resolve conflict and usher in peace. Sufism is of significance because of its intrinsic ability not only to syncretize, but also to proffer relief from the hair-splitting orthodoxy and exclusivist character of institutionalized religion. For the

persistence of hatred, avarice, strife and terror, Sufism provides ready answers. This paper study aims to explore the relevance of the story of Hir in today's turbulent times by focusing on the Sufi ideals in *Hir Varis* that have the potential to foster understanding and peace between religious communities in South Asia.

The first written text of *Hir Varis* discovered till now, is from 1820. The oldest and most accurate copy of Hir was written in Shahmukhi Punjabi (Perso-Arabic script) and was published by Kripa Ram in 1916. It is currently available in the Punjab Public Library in Lahore. It is based on the manuscript of Hafiz Shah. Varis Shah also wrote in the Shahmukhi script and the poetic version of the tale was translated into English prose by Charles Fredrick Usborne (1874-1919). Sixteen editions of this work were published between 1923 and 2004. Sant Singh Sekhon translated Hir into English verse under the title *The Love of Hir and Ranjha*, from Ludhiana in 1978. Denis Matringe translated it into French, Doris Buddenberg into German and R.K Kuldip into Italian. Richard Temple also wrote commentaries on *Hir Varis*. More recently, *Hir Varis*, with a text in Nastaliq (Shahmukhi), Gurmukhi, and Roman has been brought out by Muzaffar A. Ghaffar. Published in 2017 by Ferozsons, Lahore. It has a poetic translation and a line- by-line discourse. The work is in six volumes, with an extensive glossary.

There are two generic versions of *Hir Varis*. One is *Varis Shah Di Hir* (The Hir by Varis Shah), and the other, *The Varis Shahi Hir* or Varis Shakesque Hir. There are many followers of the larger Hir which is known as the *Asli Te Vaddi Hir* (The Real/Original and Big Hir). Indeed, this Hir dominates the oral traditions despite the fact that its characterization is impaired, the story line filled with unnecessary verses, flights of imagination etc. (Muzaffar A. Ghaffar, pp.18-19).

The *Hir Varis* is a universal text which holds as much significance today, as it did at the time when it was written. It is written in the qissa genre, a major genre of pre-modern north Indian poetry is the A qissa is an account or story and many Punjabi Sufi poets wrote in this genre during the eighteenth century. These narrative poems, called Sufi romances by modern critics, are commonly assumed to put forward 'the equation of human love and love for a divine being'. They mark the inauguration of a new literary culture in a local language, and Indian Islamic tradition. These mystical romances describe the ascetic quest of the hero towards the revelatory beauty of a heroine (or God) by linking mortification, fasting, and prayer with a female object of desire. While

eroticism and asceticism have often been linked, the hero's attainment of the heroine takes place only after an arduous ascetic quest in a hostile world. According to one legend, Hir Ranjha was a real couple who lived during the Lodhi Dynasty.

The dominant theme of the qissa - resistance to the existing order -- is beautifully woven into the larger trajectory of rural Punjab. This genre became not only an overpowering means of expression, it also attained immense popularity, as the poets deployed folk idioms and rural imagery of Punjab. As such, it was instrumental in bringing out its message in a subtle manner. Even now, singing Hir gives pleasure and mesmerizes one with the message of peace and love. The Urs of Varis Shah is held on the ninth of Sawan every year. Devotees attribute wonders to the author. Even now, newly married couples and lovers visit his shrine in Janddiala Sher Khan (District Sheikhupura, Punjab, Pakistan). In the past, the festival's bazaar was a major point of buying & selling. Besides the singing of Kalam, Dhamaal is also a hallmark of the festival.

The message of human brotherhood and love, as encapsulated in the Hir transcends the boundary of religion. Varis Shah often refers to God as *Rabb* rather than Allah, which is used by Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus alike. History has proved that partition along religious lines has failed to produce stability and to deliver security and coherence in South Asia. The Hir holds out the possibility of coexistence and mutual peace in South Asia, promising the potential availability of a new and better life free of religious intolerance; its message appears to be humanly reachable. It is easy to understand and preaches through lived experiences, which the people of the region can relate to. The Hir is stylistically succinct, written in a language which is, and has been, the language of the masses. It is unlike religious texts, which are full of ambiguities, contradicting statements and are written down in distant time, often in a language, which is different from the one used by current communities. This study aims to highlight the continuing significance of Hir in the struggle for peace and freedom. The attractive simplicity of the text, if available to a wide readership, may successfully complete the unaccomplished task of the great Sufi poet.

Cultural otherness is often cited as the reason for the partition of India, along religious lines. However, the tale of Hir contradicts the notion of cultural otherness. For millions of Punjabis, in Pakistan, as well as in India, Hir is the hallmark of a shared culture. The present study

aims to highlight the *sanjhi virasat* (shared legacy) of Punjabis that transcends political boundaries. The Hir defies the notion of hard boundaries posited between Hindu and Muslim in the late medieval period. In a subtle manner, it underlines the presence of an amorphous identity/culture. For instance, Ranjha, when interrogated by Sehti (Hir's sister in law), responds:

The way of Jog began with Maha Dev, Dev Datt the guru of
world renouncers
From Raamanand all detachment started, Praem Jot guru of
ascetic detachers
Brahma of Brahmans, Raam of Hindus, Vishnu, and Shiv of
Shivite followers
Shah Makhan of those who appear shaven, Suthra of Suthraas,
naked dwellers
Like Sayyed Jalaal of Jalaalis, and Avaes Qarni of destitute
beggars
Like Shah Madaar of Madaaris, Ansaar of Ansaaris, drummers
Vashishth of liberated ascetics, Sri Krishan lord of worshippers
Like Haaji Nausha of NauShahis, and Bhagat Kabir of weavers
Qaadri path's of Dastgir, Fareed of Chishti, Abbaasi followers
Like Naam Dev's guru of cloth printers, Luqmaan of
blacksmiths, carpenters
Khwaaja Khizar's of lords, mariners, Naqshband of Mushal,
Chughtai rulers
Sarwar Sakhi of lullaby gives, votaries, Laal Baeg of sweepers,
scavengers
Nall Raaja's guru of gamblers, Shah Shams of metal recoverers,
gold-leaf makers
Shees son of Adam's of weavers, Satan preceptor of musicians,
singers
Waaris Shah like Raam's of Hindus, Rehmaan of orthodox
Muslim believers
Like potters revere Haaji Gilgo, lord Ali's of dissenters,
separators
Salmaan Paras the guide of barbers, Rangrez of dyers, darners
Love's the master of all lovers, hunger preceptor of toddy
drawers
Suleiman's the lord of geniis, demons, Hassu Taeli of oil millers

Dawood of those who remain in armour, a staff's doyen of
corrupted aggressors

Herein, Varis Shah merges the Hindu and Muslim saints and gods with great adeptness, striding over numerous centuries, thus deconstructing popular myths and established norms. Varis Shah also makes direct references to peace making.

*Sulaah keetiyaan fatah je hath aaway, kamar jang te mool na kassiyey
nee*

When peacemaking leads to victory, we should not wage war.

In a rather long stanza of his epic poem, Varis Shah mentions around fifty casts and subcastes of women, all of them in the "women's common" (*aatan*). (Muzaffar A. Ghaffar, pp.1094-1100). Here Varis Shah portrays the interaction between different communities -- Jats and castes -- despite adhering to the vertically rigid Hindu caste system.

Though, a great deal of research has been done on the *Hir* by specialists in the field of language, hardly any historian has ventured to explore the field. The *Hir Varis* has critical bearing on the study of eighteenth century (which has been the hotbed of debate among historians). The eighteenth century witnessed the decline of the Mughal Empire and a process of reconfiguration of power. Several historians have debated its happenings through the lens of court chronicles or fiscal records. Few, if any, have ventured into the realm of literature to understand the social, economic or political reality of the time. Some historians opine that though the edifice of the Mughal empire was crumbling, the regional economies were thriving. However, the literature of this period offers a glimpse into a Punjab which was bleeding, despite all the revenue records indicating a thriving economy. This is how the Sufi, Bulleh Shah, who was the contemporary of Varis, describes the scene in Punjab:

Dar khulla hashar azab da, bura haal hoya Punjab da

The portals of Hell are wide open, Punjab is in a state of
calamity.

Varis Shah was grieved by the devastation that ensued in and around Qasur, in Punjab. He writes:

Saare Mulk Punjab kharaab vichon, saanun vadda afsos Qasur da aea.

The entire region of the Punjab is terrible, great suffering in Qasur as well

The narrative of Varis Shah is beautifully woven into the larger trajectory of political and social developments in Punjab. The romance may construct a fantasy world to liberate the imagination, but the fantasy has to be examined within the historical circumstances of its articulation. After all, fantasy does not necessarily denote a separation between the real and imaginary world. Hir is a mirror which effectively articulates resistance against the prevailing social, economic and political order. The characters of Chuchak, Hir's father, and Kaido, her paternal uncle, represent the villainy and intolerance of a feudal set up. In a similar vein, Balnath Jogi is a symbol of social withdrawal and resignation which Ranjha adopts, but another character Aiyali, the shepherd, challenges the sense of honor of Ranjha and spurs him on to aggressive action in order to attain union (*wisal*) with his beloved.

When Ranjha tries to take refuge in a mosque, the *mulla* of the mosque denies him on the grounds that Ranjha is not dressed according to the *shariat* (Islamic rules). He says:

“A mosque is the house of God. Those not in line with the Sharia cannot be allowed to enter here. Dogs and dirty *faqirs* are to be bound and punished by us with lashes. We tear off the trousers if they fall lower than the ankles. And we singe the hair that grow around the lips. The enemies of God, we shun like dogs from a distance.”

To this Ranjha retorts:

“News of death bring the odor of *Halwa* for your nostrils, you pray for the living to shorten their stay on this earth. The Sharia is a cover for the dishes of your desires. Your concern for the sinning is boundless. To the homeless, seeking shelter for a while, your doors are always close.”

Further there are arguments with Qazis (magistrates) – one, when Hir refuses to get married to Saido Khera and another, when Hir Ranjha

are presented in front of a magistrate after being caught on eloping together.

Varis Shah has seamlessly blended the reflection model (i.e., literature is an inert reflection of existing social reality) and the substitution model (i.e., literature provides an escape/sublimation, from reality - an alternative reality) into one. The romance of Hir Ranjha was narrated by Varis in a manner that had already attained a standard form. It was in the *bait* meter, which too had been perfected by his predecessors, markedly Muqbal, the poet refers to the requests made by friends to him, to write afresh the love story of Hir. He, however, reconstructed it, to convey his own interpretation of society. Varis Shah is a Muslim writer working with a Punjabi language whose extant vocabulary was conditioned to a great extent, by Hindu ideational constructs. This is despite the fact that he had a sound knowledge of Arabic and Persian as he had studied in a madrasa (*seminary*), in Qasur. The prolific use of Hindu idioms by Varis allows us to investigate how narratives frame cross-cultural interactions and make them serve higher ideological purposes. Unable to attain union (*wisal*) with his beloved Hir, Ranjha makes his way to *Tila Bal Nath*, to seek refuge from a Guru who belongs to the order of *Kan-Phad* Jogis. Herein, we see a Muslim Ranjha converted into a Hindu Jogi without any hesitation, with his ears pierced and *Mundras* (ear-rings) inserted therein. Concomitant with this is Balnath Jogi's visit to the *Panj Pirs* (five divine guides), in order to seek their blessings. There are references to the Barah Mah, Athwara, Raja Bhoj, Kauravas, Pandavas, Ravana, Lakshmi (Lakhmi), Sita, Draupadi and so on. Varis Shah seems to be intimately familiar with the Hindu epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as the Vedas. Jogi Balnath says:

Nagar alakh vajje ke ja variae, paap jaan je naad vajaaiyye ji
Sukhi duaar vasse jogi bheek maange, de dua asees sunaaiyye ji

By proclaiming Alakh (the unseen; the salutation of a jogi), we enter the town, and sins go if we speak out (or thus): The door (the household which gives alms) may live in joy. We give dua and asees (ashish).

By using Arabic word *dua* and Sanskrit word *asees* (ashish), which are part synonyms meaning “blessings”, Varis Shah unites the Bhakti (jogi) tradition with the Sufi tradition.

Balnath Jogi further says:

Varis Shah yaqeen di gall phabdi, sabho haq hi haq thehraayye ji

Varis Shah uses the Arabic word *Haq* (truth). He says, matters of faith are becoming. All we ascertain is Truth, just Truth. All is faith, all is Truth/God. (Haq is also a Quranic name of God). Here Varis Shah is uniting the Bhakti and Quranic traditions.

In another verse, Varis Shah says:

*Nath meet akkhin dargah andar
Naale arz karda maale sangda ji, Dargah la-o-baali hae haq waali,
Utthe aadmi bolda sangda ji.*

The Nath clenched his eyes in the shrine, would petition to be connected. Sir, the shrine of truth is indifferent forsooth, there for speaking out man's unabashed, Sir.

Jogi Balnath goes to the shrine (*dargah*) of the Panj Pirs to pray for Ranjha and is granted *Jog* for Ranjha. Here again, Varis Shah is conjoining the Bhakti tradition with the Sufi belief. The Hindu *jogi* goes to a Muslim *dargah* without any inhibitions.

In the entire narrative, Varis Shah uses a number of Sanskrit words – Judh (Yudh), Karodh (Krodh), Prem, Visram (Vishram), Swarg, Kaal, to name a few. His knowledge of Sanskrit enables him to amalgamate the Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian vocabulary into a beautiful whole.

The popularity of Hir suggests that the people of Punjab, resisted the domination of the higher languages of the Muslim ruling class. The *Hir Varis* opposes the hegemonic influence of the language of power and affirms that languages are socially constructed and socially negotiated. Languages are also agents of integration. The use of language of masses makes Hir popular both in India and Pakistan.

Varis Shah's own life remains shrouded in mystery, except for a few facts gleaned from the text of the Qissa he wrote. He writes:

Varis Shah wasneek Jandyal daa, shaagird Makhdoom Qasoor daa ey.

i.e he was a resident of Jandyal & a pupil of Makhdum Gulam Murtaza of Qasoor. This small village of Sandal Bar of the old times is

Jandiala Sher Khan which is now in the administrative domain of district Sheikhupura in Pakistan.

Qasur was an important centre of learning in those days. It is said that Bulleh Shah, another important Punjabi poet, was also educated at Qasur. Varis Shah received his education from Hafiz Ghulam Murtaza as Qasur, who was also a teacher of Bulleh Shah, who was some twenty years senior to Varis Shah. We can perceive the same streak of criticism of evils in society and tendency for social reform, in Bulleh Shah and Varis Shah, both. Nothing is known about Varis' career except that he was holding a middle ranking government post. He was the Pesh Imam of the mosque at Malka Hans. Possibly, it was due to this that his form of resistance is somewhat oblique, as opposed to that of Bulleh Shah who was more forthright in his criticism. The exact date of his birth, family background and lineage remain obscure. According to one version, he was born in 1735, though 1722 is taken as the generally accepted date of his birth.

Varis Shah joani di umer guzri, ajay taba nanh hirs theen baz aae

Varis Shah has passed his youth and yet he has not overcome his greedy disposition.

This means that Varis Shah was of a reasonable age when he wrote the qissa Hir Varis Shah.

After completing his education at Qasur, Varis Shah moved to the village of Malka Hans, a village twelve kilometers north of Pakpattan. Here, he lived in a small room (*hujra*), adjacent to a mosque. This historical mosque is now known as Masjid Varis Shahi, where he wrote the immortal tragedy of Hir Ranjha in 1766. Some 76 writers including well-known names such as Damodar, Mukbal, Ahmad Gujjar, Charagh Awan, Peelo and Hafiz Barkhurdur have written their own versions of the Hir story.

However, Varis Shah's Hir is considered one of the quintessential works of classical Punjabi literature. Varis borrowed the story and plot of the legend Hir Ranjha and structured it to a nuanced narrative. The earlier version of Hir written by Damodar, around the time of emperor Akbar's reign, had a happy ending. Varis Shah's Hir, however, ends on a sad note. This could be attributed to several factors.

Varis Shah's own experience of unrequited love for Bhagbhari, a Hindu girl, might have made him critical of the contemporary social

norms and inspired him to rewrite the Qissa, as an ever-fresh tragic dialogue of immutable love, highlighting a range of human emotions.

It is also likely that there existed a belief that if one wrote the Qissa Hir one's own desire (*mannat*) would be fulfilled, quite like the way there existed a belief in the efficacy of getting a copy of *Fawa'id ul Fuad* written, in the Delhi Sultanate period. Another reason could be the atmosphere of pessimism which prevailed in Punjab in those days. Varis Shah captures it thus in the completion note of his tale. He says:

The book was completed in the year 1180 Hijri.

The Bikram Calendar year was 1882.

These were the stormy ears when Jats (tillers) of land turned rulers and new governments came to be formed from house to house. The lament over the rise of Jats shows that he himself belonged to a superior class, most likely Syed. Perhaps Varis Shah was finding it hard to come to terms with the reconfiguration of power, taking place in Punjab after the onslaught from the North West. Varis Shah, the *Jogi*, was looted by the roving bands, Punjab and India, both tremble at the mention of Nadir Shah. Though the Afghan marauders are often held responsible for the turmoil in Punjab, there is no derogatory reference to the Sikhs. Bulleh Shah says:

Khaddha pitta lahe da,

Baki Ahmad Shahe da.

This highlights the fact, that Bulleh Shah too, held the Afghan invaders responsible for the misery in Punjab, remaining oblivious to their being Muslims. The absence of derogatory reference to Sikhs could be due to the fact that the Sikh chiefs (*sardars*) undertook to provide protection (*rakhi*) to the villages against all outsiders. In return, they claimed a share of the produce, which was generally much less than the revenue paid to the Mughal government (Banga, p.15). This strategy resulted in conciliation of the peasantry and ultimately led the way to territorial occupation by the Sikhs. The system became popular as the cultivators had to pay much smaller share of their produce and were shielded against those who might demand larger revenue from them. It served as a prelude to establishment of political control over a large part of Lahore province (Grewal, p.93).

The Battle of Panipat (1761), fought between the Afghans and Marathas, was actually won by the Sikhs (Khushwant Singh, p.151). The Sikhs began ousting the Afghan nominees of Ahmed Shah Abdali and eventually brought the area from Sutlej to the Indus under their control (Sinha, p.34-35). Punjab was an area which, on account of its natural and human resources, as well as their strategic location, played a crucial role in shaping the political fortunes of the subcontinent. Economically, this area was one where the economy, trade and manufacture had developed and reached a fairly high level. Traders (*Khattris*) and administrators (*Hakims*) played an important role because Punjab was strategically placed at the juncture of important trade routes to Central Asia. As a result, the history of Punjab bore the brunt of many storms, along with several peaceful interludes.

In the eighteenth century, the period in which Varis Shah writes, Punjab lay exposed to several invasions from the northwest, as it had been earlier. The Mughal empire was disintegrating, and the eighteenth century was a century of turmoil and contradictions, as has been debated by historians like Muzaffar Alam, Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib, P.J. Marshall, etc. The people of Punjab had to undergo immense turmoil and this was, perhaps, the reason why the Punjabis are a determined resilient lot, even today. Coming back to the point, Punjab faced the brunt of Nadir Shah's and Ahmad Shah Abdali's invasions. This, along with his own personal failure, perhaps, was the reason why Varis Shah gave a tragic ending to the tale. It was a continuation of the pessimism, which prevailed in the eighteenth century. One wonders, if there such was the turbulence in Punjab, then why there are the vivid descriptions of scenic beauty in the *Hir*. Images can motivate. They can inspire feelings of security, peace, warmth and hope. Varis Shah's imagery, was perhaps a conduit to support the healing process in Punjab.

While describing *Hir*'s beauty, Varis Shah writes:

Her beauty slays rich *Khojas* and *Khattris* in the bazaar, like a murderous *kizilbash* trooper riding out of the royal camp armed with a sword. (Usborne, p.41).

Literally meaning *hot head*, Kizilbash was the name of a soldierly tribe in Iran, a number of whom came to India with the armies of Nadir Shah. The word "murderous" denotes aggression, therefore the invasions of Nadir Shah & Ahmad Shah Durrani Abdali were seen as causes for

the ravaged state of Punjab. Another reason why Varis Shah wrote the qissa afresh could be his inclination towards *tasawwuf* (imagination) and *bhakti*. Varis writes that when Ranjha is trying to cross the river Chenab, along whose banks the story is set, the boatman Luddan, for whom pecuniary benefits are of prime importance declares:

Even the son of a Pir like Varis, we will not take into our boat for nothing.

Varis Shah conjures up the following image of Luddan:

Varis Shah Mian, Luddan waddi kappan, Kah shahd da ladya baaniya ne

He compares Luddan to a honey laden bania. The bania (money lender) class was often described as lecherous and unprincipled. The metaphor of bania is used to describe Luddan, the boatman.

Varis Shah also projects himself as a Pir. Also, the Qissa starts with a prayer to God and an Ode to Love, the foundation of creation; an obeisance to the Prophet, his four friends (*Khalifa*); Chishti, the well-known founder of the Chishti silsilah; his successors, including more specifically Baba Farid of Pakpattan (Gurcharan Singh, Hir Varis Shah, p.13). He also refers to himself as a *Jogi*, on several occasions. Varis Shah uses Hindu months' nomenclature, which is still in use in rural Punjab of Pakistan. Varis Shah frequently quotes from the Quran while using ideational constructs of Hinduism, thus endearing himself to both, Muslims and Hindus. So he says:

Jeyhaa beejyey Varisaa wadh layey, harf wich Quran de aayaa ee.

Varis! It is stated in the Quran that as you sow, so shall you reap

He also says:

The noblest among you in God's eyes is the one who best performs his duty.

(On the day of judgment) Salvation will depend upon deeds, be it a Sufi or a sweeper.

*Varis Shah ujaar ke wasdeyaan noon aap kheyr de naal feyr wasiyey
kiyoon*

Varis Shah! By destroying those who are living happily, how can one live in peace and tranquility?

Thus, Varis Shah is projecting the idea of peaceful coexistence in society.

The elusive Hir, like the formless absolute awakens in Ranjha, the Sufi, a desire that overpowers his mind and heart, and does not allow him any peace. However, some scholars like Saeed Ahmad construe Hir as the Sufi and Ranjha as the formless absolute. Poet Bulleh Shah describes the merging or annihilation (*fana*) of Hir's soul in God, through repetition (*zikr*) of the Name.

*Ranjha, Ranjha kar di ni, main aape Ranjha hoi, saddo nee meynoo
Dheedho Raanjha, Hir naa aakho koe*

By repeating the name of Ranjha, O friend, I myself have become Ranjha, Now call me Dhidho Ranjha, none should call me Hir.

This is in the same note as '*An al Haq*,' "I am the Truth," pronounced by Mansur al Hallaj. This alludes to the annihilation of the seeker with the Absolute. The impulse towards union is avoided through a series of narrative incidents that delay the satisfaction of desire, until the seeker is purified. This is likened to the several stations or *maqamat*, that a *mureed* (disciple) has to pass through before he attains the final union with the beloved, i.e., Allah. To achieve this goal, he has to seek the assistance of his spiritual master, the peer who is the Kanphad jogi of Tila Balnath in Jhelum. Varis Shah employs the Sufi wisdom of living harmoniously, embracing a rich variety of real-life expressions blended with local cultures, and their semiotics, imagery and symbolism.

Ranjha is also blessed by the Panj Pirs. The union is entwined in the widespread Sufi notion of annihilation (*fana*), which is a cause of celebration for the Sufi. The death of a Sufi heralds the ultimate union with the beloved God and is celebrated by Urs. In fact, this is the true birth of the Sufi. The divine form of Hir suggested both Allah's might and majesty (*jalal*) and his gentle grace (*jamal*).

Earning love can be a protracted and painful process, for which everything worldly, has to be abandoned, a process which involves much self-mortification. For this, the path of truth (*haqiqat*), has to be

followed, apart from reposing an unending trust in God (*tawakkul*). Varis Shah describes, in vivid hues, the pain and sorrow inflicted by separation. The vocabulary and the similes deployed convey devotional emotions with skillful restraint. Though the formulaic plot of Sufi romance contains a set of easily predictable conventions and motives, *Hir Varis* shows a great deal of inventiveness in reinterpreting the formula and intensifies the experience.

Some scholars of Punjabi literature, like S.S. Nur, are of the opinion that by the time Varis Shah wrote his *Hir*, European works of Aristotle, Plato etc. had become known in South Asia and that that had a profound influence on his writing, even though it was by no means, a case of mechanical appropriation of Western thought. In its own way, *Hir Varis* is marked by a diversity of sources & a richness of literary imagination.

It was this period of turbulence spanning around a hundred years, which forms the richest period of Punjabi poetry. It was a bleeding Punjab, turbulent and chaotic, that produced the best poetry - mystic, romantic, lyrical & heroic in the form of *Qissa*, *Kafis*, *Masnavis*, *Dhorey* or *Dohe*, *Dholla*, *Mahiye* etc.

When we look at history, we have the propensity to depict women as being trapped within oppressive systems. *Hir* takes the lead - be it in taking Ranjha to her father Chuchak, to be employed as cow herd (or rather buffalo herd), or be it assuring Ranjha of good times ahead, or rebuking her mother Malki for arranging her marriage, forcibly against her will and accuses her family of being unfair to her. A very active, dynamic *Hir*, stands in stark contrast to the relatively passive Ranjha, who needs constant prodding from Almighty to move towards *wisal*.

Varis Shah is showing respect to women, he says:

*Varis Shah naa rehn nachalrey oh, jehnaan naraan noon shaouq ney
naariyaan de*

The debauched men who are fond of beautiful women cannot restrain themselves.

*Waddee maan baraabar jaanan ee ey, tey bheyan baraabar chhotree
noon, jattee sattee namaan ey ho rehyey, saabat rakhyey eys langotree
noon*

Regard an old woman like your mother and a young one as your sister.

Be humble even though you are strong and preserve your chastity.

At another occasion, Hir says:

*Jaehnan betiyaan maariyan roz qiamat,
Sirin tehan de vadda gunna mian.
Milan khanen tehan phaar kar ke,
Jeekon marian ji tiven kha mian.*

Those who killed their daughters, on judgement day, they have to face a great sin.

They get to eat them up all cut up. As they killed, so must they eat them (Muzaffar A. Ghaffar, p.390)

During the course of his conversation with Sehti, Ranjha further says:

Maha Dev jehe Paarbati agge, kaam lyaaonde Si mattha tekne nun
Kaam had brought to prostrating and likes of Maha Dev before Parbati.

Maha Dev is the synonym for Lord Shiva, a god in the Hindu triad (Brahma, Vishnu, Maha Dev).

Here, Kaam (the God of Love) led him to prostrate in front of Parvati. Here, Ranjha is presenting a woman's ascendancy over man, which is a recurring phenomenon in *Hir Varis*.

Conclusion

The Hir Varis Shah highlights the assimilative culture of Punjab which gives voice to the 'other' rather than muffling it. It excoriates blind adherence to dogma and calls attention to the possibility of peaceful co-existence of different communities by following the Sufi ideals of Varis Shah. The story of Varis Shah not only portrays love between man and woman, but also depicts syncretism between languages, religions and sects. Besides being a propaedeutic for peace studies, the *Hir Varis* is an important source of history for eighteenth century Punjab.

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